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## World bids adieu to a rocky 2008 ; worries over '09

The Associated Press - January 1, 2009

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PARIS: When French shoppers start cutting back on buying champagne, oysters and foie gras for New Year's, it's been a rough year.

As Europe rang in 2009, many revelers said belt-tightening was their top New Year's resolution. The vow followed the most volatile financial year in decades, a time that saw stock markets melt around the world and hundreds of thousands of workers lose their jobs.

Throngs of merrymakers popped champagne corks and exchanged kisses on Paris' famed Champs-Elysees avenue. But even shoppers in the affluent area surrounding the blue-lit Eiffel Tower had scaled back purchases for the traditional New Year's Eve feast.

"We're not going to celebrate in a big way - we're being careful," said architect Moussa Siham, 24. "We will be eating fish for New Year's dinner."

In New York, hundreds of thousands of revelers packed a frigid Times Square for the descent of the famous Waterford crystal ball at midnight, eager to say goodbye to 2008 and hoping to put economic troubles in the past.

Sydney was the world's first major city to ring in 2009, showering its shimmering harbor with a kaleidoscope of light that drew cheers from more than a million people.

Spectator Randolph King, 63, of York, England, whose retirement fund was gutted in the global financial crisis, summed up the feeling of many as 2008 came to a close.

"I'm looking forward to 2009," he said. "Because it can't get much worse."

Political and religious leaders offered few words of consolation, with the majority predicting more gloom for the year to come.

In the splendor of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI called for "sobriety and solidarity" in 2009.

During a year's end vespers service Wednesday evening, the pope admitted these times are "marked by uncertainty and worry for the future" but urged people not to be afraid and to help each other.

In Greece, arsonists attacked at least 10 banks and two car dealerships around Athens early Thursday, police said. No injuries or arrests were reported by authorities.

Police had braced for violence at New Year following serious riots earlier this month over the police's fatal shooting of a teenage boy.

At Athens' main Syntagma Square, some 200 pro-Palestinian protesters staged a peaceful demonstration. Under the eyes of scores of riot police, the protesters chanted slogans and burned flags of Israel, the United States and the European Union.

President Karolos Papoulias promised to pay heed to the concerns of low-income Greeks, who have used the recent riots to express their dissatisfaction with dismal economic prospects.

"Let us listen to the cry of despair by all those who live on the margins of society and face insecurity about tomorrow," Papoulias said.

In Iceland, an annual New Year's Eve broadcast featuring the country's prime minister was forced off the air by demonstrators who stormed the hotel where it was being filmed. Protesters lobbed fireworks and water balloons at police, who responded with pepper spray.

Increasingly rowdy demonstrations have been a fixture of Iceland's political scene since the country's economy, an early victim of the credit crunch, imploded under the weight of its debts.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel pledged to continue campaigning for stronger regulations to keep financial markets in check.

"The difficulties that await us in 2009 will be great," Sarkozy predicted.

Meanwhile, partygoers everywhere struggled to forget their troubles.

In Ireland, Danny McCoy, a recently laid-off construction worker, mulled over his waning fortunes as he got his hair cut at the Drumcondra Barber Shop on Dublin's rough north side.

"Last New Year's I had a fat wallet. I didn't have to worry about paying for my round, never mind the taxi fare home," he said. "Tonight I've a mind to keep the festivities close to home, because I can't really afford to do anything."

London Mayor Boris Johnson rejected defeatism in a New Year's message projected on the wall of the Shell Building.

"There are those who say we should look ahead to 2009 with foreboding," Johnson said.

"I want to quote Col. Kilgore in 'Apocalypse Now' when he says 'Someday captain, this war is going to end'; and someday, this recession is going to end," he added. "Let's go forward into 2009 with enthusiasm and purpose."

But one poll found that Britons were preoccupied with their sinking finances.

Some 48 percent intended to reduce or eliminate debt for their New Year's resolution, and 42 percent planned to cut spending, according to the survey by Loudhouse Research.

In Italy, which is going through a recession, many were forced to hold more modest celebrations this year. A retailers' association said Italians would spend 9 percent less than last year on their New Year's Eve dinner, while 4 percent would not celebrate at all.

In Malaysia, the government - mindful of the shaky economy - opted against sponsoring any celebration at all.

In Hong Kong, thousands thronged to popular Victoria Harbor for a midnight fireworks display, but those with investments linked to collapsed U.S. bank Lehman Brothers found little joy in the celebration.

"I don't think there's any reason for me to celebrate after knowing that my investment is worth nothing now," said electrical repairman Chan Hon-ming, who had purchased a \$30,000 Lehman-backed investment.

In India, many were happy to see the end of 2008, after a series of terrorist attacks in several cities, culminating in a three-day siege in Mumbai in which gunmen killed 164 people.

"The year 2008 can best be described as a year of crime, terrorist activities, bloodshed and accidents," said Tavishi Srivastava, 51, an office worker in the northern city of Lucknow. "I sincerely hope that 2009 will be a year of peace and progress."

In Thailand, after protests paralyzed the government for months, the country was finally calm on the last day of 2008 as loyalists of ousted ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra took off for a five-day national holiday.

Celebrations were muted in China, where fireworks and feasting are reserved mainly for the Lunar New Year, which in 2009 begins on Jan. 26.

At midnight in Japan, temples rang their bells 108 times - representing the 108 evils being struck out - as worshippers threw coins as offerings and prayed. In Tokyo, volunteers stirred huge pots of New Year's rice-cake soup and doled out blankets and clothing to the needy.

Japan has long boasted a system of lifetime employment at major companies, but that has unraveled this year amid the financial crisis.

"There's no work," muttered Mitsuo Kobayashi, 61, as he picked up a wool scarf, a coat and pants. "Who knows what next year will bring?"

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